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Statement submitted by Population Action International, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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Statement

The Changing Age Structures of Populations and Their Implications for Development

In 1994, the Programme of Action adopted at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) noted that "the emerging picture is that of a world facing increasingly diverse demographic situations."[1] Indeed, world population today is moving in several directions that may seem contradictory. Slowing growth rates and higher median ages have led to concern among analysts and policymakers in much of the industrialized world about falling birthrates and population decline. Population decline has not yet begun in most of these countries and is likely to proceed gradually when it does, in contrast to the still-rapid pace of growth in the fastest-growing national populations. Today, 55 percent of the world's people live in countries whose current birthrates guarantee indefinite future growth.

Population age structures – the comparative size of specific age groups relative to others or to the population as a whole – yield insights into many of the development challenges and prospects that countries face. Age structures carry particular importance when a large proportion of a country's population is passing through one of life's dependent stages, such as childhood or old age, or when a small proportion is passing through an age of productivity. In such cases, society's human, material and natural resources are likely to be stretched and national peace and security likely to be tested.

Age structure is profoundly shaped by a population's position along the demographic transition – the transformation of a population characterized by large families and short lives into a population of small families and long lives. Although the demographic transition unfolds distinctly in each population and is rarely continuous or smooth, all countries have experienced its first stage – a decline in death rates, especially among infants and the very young. Research provides substantial evidence that girls' education, later marriage and women's employment outside the home and have played important roles in decreasing childhood mortality, thus increasing the demand for contraception in adulthood.[2] In turn, increased use of contraception leads to a decline in fertility rates, the second key characteristic of the demographic transition.[3]

Population Action International has found that age structure has significant impacts on countries' stability, governance, economic development and social well-being. Very young and youthful age structures – those in which, generally, 60 percent or more of a country's population is under the age of 30 – are most likely to undermine national development, particularly vulnerability to civil conflict and democratic governance. Meanwhile, countries in the midst of the demographic transition stand to

[1] United Nations. 1996. Programme of Action adopted at the International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo, 5-13 September 1994. New York: UNFPA. Paragraph 6.2.

[2] Smith, L., and L. Haddad. 2000. "Overcoming Child Malnutrition in Developing Countries: Past Achievements & Future Choices." Report 30. Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute; Lutz, W., and A. Goujon. 2001. "The World's Changing Human Capital Stock: Multi-state Population Forecasts by Educational Attainment." *Population and Development Review* 27(2): 323-339; Bongaarts, J., Mauldin, W.P., and J.F. Phillips. 1990. "The Demographic Impact of Family Planning Programs." *Studies in Family Planning* 21(6): 299-310.

[3] Robey, B., S.O. Rutstein, and L. Morris. 1993. "Fertility Decline in Developing Countries." *Scientific American* 269(6): 60-67.

experience significant benefits from demographic change, including higher economic growth rates, if their governments take advantage of the opportunity it presents. Countries with a mature age structure, in which more than 55 percent of the population is above age 30, have generally been the most stable, democratic and highly developed.

Population age structures can shift relatively rapidly and sometimes dramatically in response to policies and programs, to epidemic diseases and to other natural and human-induced events. In particular, societies and governments can influence age structures through policies that affect the demographic forces – births, deaths and migration – that shape these structures. The international community has an important role to play in ensuring demographic progress by implementing the universal access to reproductive health services called for in the ICPD Programme of Action.

To promote balanced age structures in countries that retain high birth and death rates, policies should focus on significantly increasing funding for programs that improve access to modern contraception and other sexual and reproductive health services, expanding educational opportunities for girls, increasing women's participation in government and throughout society, and enhancing employment opportunities for youth. As mortality and fertility rates decline in countries with a transitional age structure, continued progress should be encouraged with full scaling-up of such programs and services to make them universally available. Finally, in countries with the low fertility and mortality rates that signify the end of the demographic transition, governments should consider policies that encourage greater equity for women. This could include greater balance in women's professional and family responsibilities and increasing men's involvement in childrearing, without encroaching on the rights of individuals and couples to decide for themselves the timing and number of childbirths.